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REVIEW ESSAY

RADICALISM AND RESPECTABILITY IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF LABOUR ORGANISATIONS

IAN ROBERTS

Rosemary Aris, **Trade Unions and the Management of Industrial Conflict**. London: Macmillan, 1998, £42.50 (£15.99 pbk), vii+201 pp. (ISBN 0-333-65798-5 hbk; 0-333-65799-3 pbk).

Huw Beynon and Terry Austrin, **Masters and Servants: Class and Patronage in the Making of a Labour Organisation**. London: Rivers Oram Press, 1998, £12.95, xvii+403 pp. (ISBN 1-85489-001-8 hbk; 1-85489-000-X pbk).

These books are both concerned with the historical development of labour organisations. There is overlap in the time periods concerned, with Aris looking at the role of trade unions and the State in the management of industrial conflict in the years 1910–21, and Beynon and Austrin, whilst focusing more sharply on the single case of the Durham miners, covering the period from the beginning of the nineteenth century until the end of the 1930s. Here the similarities end and while both books succeed well in their own terms, they contrast greatly in their methodology and ultimately their whole approaches to historical sociology.

The approach taken by Rosemary Aris is the more 'traditional' of the two. It is as the author acknowledges 'a study of industrial conflict from above, not below'. The author is at her strongest when analysing the written records of Royal Commissions, or papers of the Ministry of Labour, Ministry of Munitions and so on. Some fascinating insights are thus generated into the machinations of the Whitehall machine and its informants. This side of the story is well told and in itself justifies buying the book.

Perhaps less strong is the wider analytical framework in which some of this material is located. It begins with a fairly well-worn discussion of three approaches to the role of trade unions and industrial conflict. The revolutionary school suggests that the State will seek to incorporate trade-union leaders in order to drive a wedge between the leaders and the rank-and-file members, ensuring that direct action and radicalism are contained within the workplace. Such a cynical attempt at incorporation is contrasted with the second approach, that of corporatism, which suggests that trade unions will genuinely pass from being interest groups to becoming estates of the realm. Finally, there is a revisionist approach which is strongly critical of the very existence of a widespread rank-and-file movement, attributing agitation to a small minority of activist workers.

The author goes on to consider some of the detail of historical developments during the period. Ultimately, however, the book is constrained by the tripartite framework to which Aris returns in the conclusion. She suggests that the evidence upholds a modified version of the rank-and-file approach. The modification is important because, rather than positing an essentially radical rank and file, Aris suggests that the mass of workers are characterised by inconsistency; they will fight for immediate issues by the only means available.

There are echoes here of the position taken by Michael Mann (1982), suggesting

that working-class consciousness is characterised by internal inconsistency. Should we see such an account in the way that Gordon Marshall (1988) has characterised the work of Mann, as a retreat from explanation? I prefer to see this part of the conclusion as reflecting the sources used and the methodological approach taken. If the account is based upon 'history from above' then the attribution of consciousness must at best be reconstructed from 'perceived perceptions', in which the inconsistency of the mass is often brought into sharp relief with the more reflexive policy making of the State. Such a position is likely to be strengthened when the primary focus is upon the nature of conflict, rather than a more rounded dialectic including consensual elements. Similarly, a focus upon the sharp points of conflict tends to privilege economic struggle over more political and cultural counter-forces.

The detail of the book is suggestive of other factors. Thus, in relation to the explosion of unofficial action predicated upon labour shortage and resulting in wage drift in the wake of the First World War, the author notes that the Board of Trade considered workers to be insufficiently under the sway of 'ordinary economic control'. She goes on to quote the permanent secretary of the Board of Trade who opined that 'the difficulty . . . is that the workmen, though engaged in armaments work, still feel themselves to be working essentially for private employers with whom they have only a cash nexus and that in the present circumstances a cash nexus is quite inadequate to secure control' (p. 103). He went on to argue the need for legislative control and the appeal to patriotism, which he considered 'a motive not of a purely economic character'. What insights such as this suggest is that in order to evaluate the consistency, or otherwise, of consciousness, and so produce an analysis adequate at the level of meaning, we need to be aware of the plurality of frames within which people attempt to live their lives. What may appear as (inter-) subjective inconsistency when considered within one frame, such as industrial conflict, may rather point to more objective complexities once a plurality of frames, economic, political, religious and affective are considered.

It is exactly this complex context that is developed in Beynon and Austrin's account of the development of the Durham Miners Association. Their point of departure is the apparent paradox that within the Durham coal-field, where they detect a stronger working-class sub-culture than elsewhere, why should it be that the labour organisation has been dominated by traditions of moderation, officialdom and respectability? Their overall answer to this question is similar to Tom Nairn's characterisation that the English working class have constituted a class 'for themselves in themselves', yet it is the exquisitely detailed route taken to this position that makes this book a classic.

The mining industry in the Durham coal-field represented, from its very conception, a paradox. Coal mining was an industry of modern capitalism and yet in Durham the coincidence of land ownership and capital interest perpetuated almost feudal relations. It called into being wage labour in a society dominated by the institutions of aristocratic rule within an essentially rural society. It produced figures such as Lord Londonderry, who were capitalist but not of the bourgeoisie. Their allegiance was to county society rather than the commercialism of the city. As a regional force in the early nineteenth century the owners of the land and the owners of the mines combined as effectively as any medieval guild to restrict the output of coal in order to keep prices high in the London market, using a system known as 'the vend'.

The stamp of paternalism could be seen in the dealings of the owners with the labourers, through what the authors describe as the 'Durham system'. This involved the use of tied housing, which accommodated 90 per cent of the workers in the coal field, far higher than elsewhere. However, it also extended into free medical attention, schooling and education, the provision of money for social events, flower shows, colliery bands, etc. Paternalism as an ideology gave employers their sense of place, its practices linking the employer to the worker.

That link was stronger than in other modern industries due to another aspect of the Durham system, the fact that until 1872 it was bonded, not free, labour that was employed in the coalfield. All of these aspects combined in the Durham system to ensure that relations between capital and labour were about more than the cash nexus. As the authors suggest: 'It was a contract which extended beyond wages, establishing (via "free" housing and coal) economic control into the very fabric of civil society in the mining districts. So too was it used as a flexible method for disciplining labour' (p. 32). It was the struggle against bonded labour which saw the beginnings of the Durham Miners Association (DMA), a struggle which gained in intensity once external pressures had affected a collapse of the vend in the mid-1840s, obliging the employers to seek to maximise output. A first problem that confronted those trying to organise trade-union activity was that the employers controlled almost all the public spaces in the villages. There followed an elective affinity between the available autonomous physical space and the autonomous moral standpoint from which to oppose the employers: both were provided through primitive Methodism. The former was within the physical space of the chapel and the latter was the opposition of the egalitarian organisational forms and substantive content of primitive Methodism to the hierarchy of the established Church to which the employers owed allegiance.

The emphasis on respectability and morality represented both a religious commitment and a yearning for acceptance as human beings within village, county and ultimately national life. Such a stance was not without complication, in particular there were evident tensions between local and national level unionism, and between rank and file and county leaders. By 1872, with the repeal of the bond, the DMA could point to the securing of 'free' labour as the assertion of place in society. As the union developed it secured formal recognition of place yet in turn was colonised by the old order. As symbolic of this was the establishment of the union regional headquarters, Redhills, in Durham (the citadel) rather than in Newcastle, the commercial centre. Over time the power of the DMA was to become secularised as new generations owed allegiance more to the Independent Labour Party and socialism than to Methodism and liberalism. This movement was accompanied by an increasing exercise of political power in local government and ultimately in supplying MPs.

An emphasis on respectability rather than revolution remained, with political power being lodged with union men, whilst economic power remained with the pit owners. The Durham Miners Association developed from initial principles of morality imbibed within the organisational pragmatics and ethical egalitarianism of Methodism to the responsibilities of exercising established power over communities in local government. The model of the paternalist employer served well as a mould for the development of labourite municipal socialism. In this sense, the position that the DMA constructed was one in which they were 'strong enough for reformism'.

The range of sources deployed by Beynon and Austrin is truly impressive, from the use of Hansard and national-level agreements to local written material, individual biographies and oral history. In this way the account contrasts with the Aris book in being an example of both history from above and history from below. In attending to issues as diverse as the iconography of the union banner, the position of women in the mining villages, the role of the co-op and the club this account comes as close as any sociology does to capturing a comprehensive account of the lives of the people observed.

Both of the books considered here are useful additions to sociological literature. The account by Aris is well researched and its use of primary data delivers a real addition to our knowledge about industrial conflict during the period. Beynon and Austrin have, I believe, delivered something rather more profound: here there is life!

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